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**Strategic communication across borders: Country and age effects in the practice of  
communication professionals in Europe**

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### **Abstract**

In this research we investigated whether the perception of the importance of certain types of media, strategic issues, and excellence in the professional field of strategic communication in Europe differs across countries and across generations. Data were used from the 2007 ( $N = 1087$ ) and 2016 ( $N = 2710$ ) edition of the European Communication Monitor (ECM), an annual survey among strategic communication professionals in Europe. For the first time a basic two-level multilevel regression model was used to assess country effects and individual predictors (age, gender, education, position, and experience in the field) of media use (of mass media, owned media, social media, and interpersonal communication) and perceptions of the level of excellence of communication of the organisation. Country and generational effects on the perception of strategic issues for the field were analysed using chi-square tests. Results show that in 2016 country effects are significant for the perception of the importance of mass media and social media use, interpersonal communication, and strategic issues for the field. In 2007 no such country effects were found. These results suggest that the influence and the context of the country of residence of the strategic communication professional has increased between 2007 and 2016.

## **Strategic communication across borders: Country and age effects in the practice of communication professionals in Europe**

### **Introduction**

Strategic communication today is not only a global field of communication research but also one of the key competitive advantages available to all kind of organizations everywhere in the world. The use of strategic communication by organisations makes it a powerful societal force. Individuals use their communication in the current media landscape strategically as well, for example on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. Strategic communication therefore, is an omnipresent phenomenon in today's world.

Strategic communication of organizations is purposeful, planned, and managed. The use of (mass) media has always been at the heart of the profession (Verčič & Verčič, 2016; Verhoeven, 2016; Zerfass, Verčič & Wiesenber, 2016). Today this is often a combination of traditional mass media (hereafter mass media), social media, and media that are produced and owned by organisations themselves (Tench, Verčič, Zerfass, Moreno & Verhoeven, 2017). Adjusting to the changing media landscape has been a challenge to many organisations in the last decade. Coping with the digital evolution and the social web has consistently been labelled one of the most important strategic issues by communication professionals in Europe (Tench et al., 2017). Strategic issues are matters of concern that are relevant for strategic communication professionals. Handling these issues well can make a big difference for the effectiveness of communication management and in the end for the performance of the organisation. Successful approaches to strategic communication and its effects are regularly described as excellent. In recent research excellent strategic communication is defined as a communication department that has substantial influence on the top management of an

organisation, and that is also more successful and effective than other communication departments (Verčič & Zerfass, 2016). Excellent strategic communication requires a connected organization with an influential communication department where ambitious professionals work (Tench et al., 2017).

Results from the European Communication Monitor (ECM), an annual survey among European strategic communication professionals since 2007, suggest differences in media use strategic issues, and excellent performances among countries in Europe and also between various generations of communication professionals, job experience in the field, gender and hierarchical position in an organisation (see for an overview of the ECM surveys 2007-2016 in Tench et al., 2017 and for later years Zerfass et al., 2017; 2018; 2019.). Apart from differences among countries and generations the question is also whether media use, the perception of strategic issues and excellent communication performance have changed over time. Until now the differences among European countries and generations of communication professionals have not been analysed using multilevel modelling. For the first time multilevel modelling will be used to analyse data from the ECM. In this study the following overall research question (ORQ) is raised: Are country of residence and the age of European strategic communication professionals, predictors of their perception of the importance and the use of media for communication with stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences, their perception of strategic issues in the field, and their perception of excellence in strategic communication, and did these predictors change over time?

Using data from the ECM 2007 (N = 1,087) and 2016 (N = 2,710), the importance of media for addressing stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences, and strategic issues for the field will be analysed and compared over time, specifically looking for country and age effects. The perception of the level of excellence of the communication function will also be analysed on

country and age effects using the data from 2016 only, since excellence questions were not part of the monitor in 2007.

## **Theoretical background**

### **Mediatisation**

In the last decades media have become integrated into all levels of society (see e.g. Hjarvard, 2008; 2013; Van der Meer, Kroon, Verhoeven & Jonkman, 2019). We do no longer live *with* media, but *in* media, some say (Deuze, 2012). The process through which media became more and more important and influential in society is often called mediatisation (e.g. Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). The social process of mediatisation and the development of media technology has also changed the way organisations communicate considerably in the last decade (Zerfass Verčič, & Wiesenberg, 2016). Organisations can no longer only rely on the traditional mass media to get their messages across and reach their stakeholders. Today they have to actively communicate with publics online and through social media as well. As a result of this changing media landscape some corporations are becoming media producers themselves searching for an audience with their own media. Besides advertising, publicity and press relations, a whole range of new media practices have emerged to communicate directly to publics; from social media and web care teams to alliances between corporations and media companies to create new media channels and continuing communication through owned media; the new term for corporate publishing). In the new media landscape new touchpoints with audiences are added leading to new ways of interaction and speeding up considerably the communication process as well as adding new active publics. This omnipresence of media and mediated communication is the most important aspect of mediatisation.

Data from the ECM indeed show that a great convergence of media importance and media use in the field of communication management has taken place in Europe since 2007.

Today, all media types and channels are perceived as equally important by communication professionals. Offline and online press and media relations, corporate publishing or owned media, online communication, social media, mobile communication, events, interpersonal, and non-verbal communication are all used as media channels. They all constitute one big group of media, used by professionals. That is a very different situation compared to 2007 when there were still clear boundaries between the different media types and the importance communication professionals attributed to the different media channels. Press and media relations stood apart from other media such as social media, interpersonal and nonverbal communication, events, and paid communication. Over the years the importance of online communication and social media increased, but it did not fully replace the importance of press and media relations. The gatekeepers of the traditional mass media remain important (Tench et al., 2017).

Although all media are considered equally important, in practice mediatisation has three different faces for communication professionals in organisations: the classical face of press and media relations with journalists, the new face that goes under the heading of social media or computer mediated communication and the future face of strategic mediatisation where opportunities are taken and alliances with media corporations are being built to search for new audiences (Verčič & Verčič, 2016; Zerfass, et al., 2016).

We do not know what the differences are in the assessment of the importance of specific media in various European countries by communication professionals, and also not whether this differs across generations. Does media use by communication professionals vary among countries, between generations or both?

The media system professionals work in, could also be of influence here. Hallin and Mancini (2004) described three models of media systems in the western world. These systems have different characteristics and are labelled as liberal, democratic corporatist, and a

polarized pluralist media system. In Europe these three media systems exist next to each other. In the liberal media system the market usually dominates with the exception of Great-Britain and Ireland where a strong public broadcasting system is in place. The democratic corporatism of the Northern European media system has strong state intervention combined with protection for press freedom. It is characterized by strong public broadcasting as well. This model is in place in countries like Denmark, Finland, Germany and The Netherlands. The polarized pluralist or Mediterranean model is, like the democratic corporatism model also characterized by strong state intervention combined with press subsidies. Patterns of this model are found in Southern European countries like France, Spain and Portugal. The question here is whether the media system influences the attitudes of communication professionals regarding the importance of media channels for communication with stakeholders.

In this study we therefore ask:

RQ1: Does the assessment of the importance of media channels to address stakeholders, gatekeepers, and audiences differ across European countries and across generations, and does the media system affect the assessment of the relevance of media?

### **Strategic issues for communication**

Nowadays communication is often seen as strategised work (Tench et al., 2017; Van Ruler, 2018). To be strategic in an organisation means to take on a managerial (strategic) role over a technical (instrumental) role (see e.g. Gregory, 2010; Grunig & Hunt, 1984, Van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). Part of this strategic role of the communication professional is also reflecting on and addressing strategic issues in the broad professional field of communication. Since the beginning of the ECM professionals were asked about the main strategic challenges for



communication management. Consistently the results show that the challenge of linking communication to corporate or business strategies is the most important issue for the field (Tench et. al, 2017). This should be the top priority for the on-going development of strategic communication as a professional field. This issue shows that despite growing influence, the profession is still fighting to get a place at the decision making table which is a key determinate to enable communication to be an active player in the strategic management of the organisation (Cornelissen, Bekkum & Van Ruler, 2013; Verčič & Grunig, 2002, Verhoeven, 2014) Other issues that have also been important since 2007 are the changes that the new media landscape has brought to the professional field. Coping with this media evolution that included the expanding influence of the social web and dealing with the demand for active audiences were issues that peaked at the beginning of the 2010s. Nevertheless practitioners seem to have found an equilibrium and ways to deal with these issues by now. Firstly because they have acquired competences in the use of new media and because the expectations of these new media have probably reached their upper limits. In other words new media are no longer the new kid in town.

The surveys of the ECM suggest differences among countries: ‘Linking business strategy and communication’ is the hottest issue in Spain, Finland and Ukraine. ‘Coping with the digital evolution and the social web’ is the top issue in Ireland, Belgium, Romania, Turkey and Croatia; ‘Building and maintaining trust’ is the top issue in Slovenia and Sweden; while in France the top issue is ‘Matching the needs to address more audiences and channels with limited resources’. The question is whether those differences among countries are statistically robust overall, and how different age groups assess the strategic issues for the field.

In this study we therefore ask the question:

RQ2: Does the assessment of strategic issues for the field of communication differ across European countries and across different age groups?

### **Excellence Framework**

Since 2014 a so-called Comparative Excellence Framework for communication management has been introduced and used in the ECM (Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven & Moreno, 2014, pp. 133-149; Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno & Tench, 2015, pp. 106-125; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Moreno, Tench & Verčič, 2016, pp. 108-125. For a detailed explanation see Verčič & Zerfass, 2016). The framework builds on the self-assessment and benchmark logic of organizational excellence approaches, and applies it to the field of communication management by using established indicators from public relations research. Communication departments were identified as excellent along four indicators: advisory influence (senior managers take recommendations of the communication department (very) seriously); executive influence (communication will (very) likely be invited to senior-level meetings dealing with organizational strategic planning); success (the communication of the organisation is (very) successful); and competence (the quality and ability of the communication department is (much) better compared to those of competing organisations). Only organisations clearly outperforming in all four dimensions (values 6 or 7 on a 7-point Likert scale) were considered as excellent in a benchmark exercise. Approximately one out of five departments was identified as excellent in various applications of this framework. Striving for excellence is considered to be one the most important aspects of professionalisation of communication management (Tench et al., 2017). It is interesting to know if the perception of excellence of the communication function varies across countries in Europe and across generations or not?

In this study we therefore ask the question:

RQ3: Does the perception of excellence of the communication department and –function of the organisation differ across European countries and across different age groups?

### **Method**

To answer the overall research question (ORO) ‘are country of residence and the age of European strategic communication professionals, predictors of their perception of the importance and the use of media for communication with stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences, their perception of strategic issues in the field, and their perception of excellence in strategic communication, and did these predictors change over time?’ a basic two-level multilevel regression model was used. In this method the differences among countries and individual professionals are estimated simultaneously. Multilevel models were used to analyse country and generational differences in media use and excellence in communication. To assess the differences in perception of the strategic issues in the field chi-square analysis was used.

### **Sample and data**

To answer the research questions, data from the ECM were used. Since 2007 the ECM is organised by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) and the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD), supported by different partners and sponsors over the years. The study is led by the University of Leipzig in Germany in cooperation with the University Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid, Spain, Leeds Beckett University, United Kingdom, (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia and University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

We used the datasets from 2007 and 2016. In 2007 1,087 people from 22 countries filled out the questionnaire with an average age of 41.3 years. Almost 50% of them had more than 10 years of experience in the field. In 2016 2,710 people from 43 countries filled out the questionnaire with an average age of 41.6 years. Almost 60% of them had more than 10 years of experience in the field. The majority of the respondents were female (58.1%) and had a master's diploma or higher (68.9%). The respondents from 2016 worked in different kind of organisations; joint stock companies (19.5%), private companies (17.9%), government owned organisations (13.1%), non-profit organisations (11.9%) and consultancies (37.5%). Most of them had a position as head of communications (37.2%), followed by unit leader (32.1%), team member (24.9%) or other (5.8%). In 2007 only age and experience were asked as demographic variables.

Although the sample cannot be considered as representative for the field (that is not possible because the population of communication professionals in Europe is unknown) the respondents are leading communication professionals who can be considered as decision makers, well informed about the trends, developments and performance of the professional field of communication in Europe.

In both years tens of thousands (40,000 in 2016) professionals throughout Europe were invited with personal e-mails based on a database provided by the EACD. Additional invitations were sent via national research collaborators and professional associations. The online questionnaires in English language was pre-tested with communication professionals from various countries and is online for one month.

### **Questions, variables and constructs**

*Dependent variables.* In this research six variables were used as dependent variables: Mass media (1) , owned media (media owned and controlled by the organisation) (2), social

media (3) and interpersonal communication (4) as independents for media use, strategic issues in the field (5), and excellence in communication (6). For each variable the applicable questions about media use, strategic issues, and excellence were used.

*Media use.* Media use was measured with a 5-point Likert scale question: How important are the following methods in addressing stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences today (1 = not important – 5 = very important)? The methods asked in both years (2007 and 2016) were press and media relations (print media, online media, television (/radio), corporate publishing, online communication, social media, events and non-verbal communication. In 2007 sponsoring, personal communication, and paid information were also asked. In 2016 mobile communication was added. For both years four constructs were made to use in this research: Mass media, owned media, social media, and interpersonal communication. First the five point scale was recoded for every item into a score between 0 and 1 ( $1 = 0.2$ ,  $2 = 0.4$ ,  $3 = 0.6$ ,  $4 = 0.8$  and  $5 = 1$  divided by 5) to construct a continuous variable that can be used in a multilevel model. The new variable consists of the sum of the items divided by the number of items. Mass media consisted in both years of three items: addressing print media, online media and TV/radio. The variable owned media consisted in 2007 of the five items corporate publishing/media, online communication by the organisation itself, events, sponsoring, and paid information and in 2016 of three items: Corporate publishing/media, online communication and events. The variable social media consisted in 2007 of one item social media and in 2016 of two items: Social media and mobile communication. The variable interpersonal communication consisted in 2007 of one item personal communication and in 2016 of one item: Face-to-face communication. Non-verbal communication (as the appearance and architecture of the buildings of an organisation) is left out of the analysis.

*Strategic issues.* Strategic issues in the field were asked in both years (2007 and 2016) with the same question: Here are some issues that might become relevant for public relations and communication management within the next three years. Please pick those three which are most important from your point of view. In 2007 10 issues were listed, in 2016 11 issues were listed. The following four of those issues were the same in both years: Dealing with the demand for new transparency and active audiences, coping with the digital evolution and the social web, linking business strategy and communication, and building and maintaining trust. To compare the differences in the perception of strategic issues between 2007 and 2016 only the four issues listed in both years were included in the analysis. Each strategic issue was recoded in a dichotomous variable issue mentioned (= 1) or not mentioned (= 0).

*Excellence in communication.* Excellence in communication was operationalised with the so-called excellence index. This index was introduced in 2014 (Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven & Moreno, 2014) and elaborated upon in 2016 (Verčič & Zerfass, 2016) as the Comparative Excellence Framework for Communication Management. The framework builds on the self-assessment and benchmark logic of organizational excellence approaches, and applies it to the field of communication management by using indicators from public relations research. Communication was identified as excellent along four indicators: Advisory influence (senior managers take recommendations of the communication professionals/department (very) seriously); executive influence (communication professionals will (very) likely be invited to senior-level meetings dealing with organizational strategic planning); success (the communication of the organisation is (very) successful); and competence (the quality and ability of the communication professionals/department is (much) better compared to those of competing organisations). For this research the excellence index for every respondent working in an organisation (so excluding consultants) was used based on the four items mentioned above measured on a 7 point Likert scale (1 = not

important/seriously to 7 = very important/seriously). The values of the index were recoded into a score between 0 and 1 (1 = 0, 2 = 0.16, 3 = 0.32, 4 = 0.48, 5 = 0.64, 6 = 0.8, and 7 = 1) to construct a continuous variable to be used in a multilevel model.

*Independent variables.* The most important independent variables in this research are country (as an indicator of differences among countries) and age (as an indicator for generation). Country was measured by asking each respondent to fill in their country of residence. In 2007 22 countries were identified and in 2016 43 countries. In the ECM the population of European countries is based on the official country list of the European Union (<http://europa.eu/about-eu/countries/>). Respondents were asked to fill in their age. For 2007 and 2016 an additional independent variable experience was available as a categorical variable (1 = up to 5 years, 2 = 6 -10 years and 3 = more than 10 years). In 2016 the following extra variables were available: gender (dichotomous, 1 = female, 0 = male), education (categorical, 1 = no academic education, 2 = bachelor's level, 3 = master's level and 4 = PhD level) and position in the organisation (categorical, 1 = head, 2 = team leader, 3 = team member). The extra variables experience, gender, education and position in the organisation were used as individual predictors in the model. For analysing media use in different countries an extra independent was added: Media system. Following Hallin and Mancini's (2004) mapping of media systems across countries the variable media system consisted of four categories (1 = democratic corporatist, 2 = liberal, 3 = polarized pluralist and 4 = other). Each country was labelled as one of the four categories of media system in a categorical variable according to the classification Hallin and Mancini (2004) gave. For example Germany and The Netherlands were coded 1 (democratic corporatist), Spain and Portugal as 3 (polarized pluralist) etcetera.

## Analysis

To analyse the dependent variables media use for 2007 and 2016 a hierarchical dataset was created with 1,087 professionals at the individual level and 22 countries at the country level for 2007 and 2,710 at the individual level and 43 countries at the country level in 2016. To analyse these hierarchical data we used basic two-level multilevel regression modelling. In this method the differences among countries and individual professionals are estimated simultaneously. This method enables getting better estimations of country effects than with other methods of analysis. The same multilevel analysis was done for the dependent variable excellence in communication for 2016. A comparison with 2007 was not possible because the items of the excellence index were not part of the 2007 survey. To prepare the data for multilevel modelling the county variable was used as an identifier for the respondents. The variable age was recoded so that the minimum age in the dataset corresponded with 0 (so 18 years = 0, 19 years = 1 etc.) which is necessary for the analysis.

To assess country differences for media use (in 2007 and 2016) and excellence in communication (in 2016) we started the analysis with the estimation of the so-called null or no-predictor model (model 0) with a random intercept and without predictors to assess the variance component of the country level. The country-intercept variance was assessed using the Wald Z statistic. If the country-intercept variance was not significant, no further analyses were made because in that case the development of a multilevel model is not warranted. If this country-intercept variance was significant model 1 was run, starting with adding individual predictor age for both years. After that, the significance of the country-intercept variance was checked again. If it was still significant the following individual predictors were added: Experience in 2007 and experience, education, gender, and position in the hierarchy in 2016. Also the predictor media system at the country level was added in both years. To check the improvement of the model fit, -2 Res. Log. Likelihood was used.



The analysis of a dichotomous dependent variable like strategic issues in the field is not possible with a standard multilevel regression analysis. To analyse the dependent variable strategic issues therefore a simple chi-square analysis was done with country as a categorical independent variable and age as categorical variable grouped into five decades: 29 or younger, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60 or older. To elaborate on the analysis of difference between countries, instead of looking at the highest scoring issues within counties, an analysis was made of the highest scoring country within an issue. In other words instead of comparing columns of the cross tabulation, the rows were compared.

For all analyses IBM SPSS MIXED was used.

## **Results**

### **Media use by communication professionals**

For the four dependent variables of media use; mass media (1), owned media (2), social media (3), and interpersonal communication (4) first the null models were run for both years. For 2007 these null models do not show any significant variance among countries in the importance of media use to address stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences. No further analyses for 2007 was therefore done.

The null models for 2016 did show significant country effects in the use of mass media, social media, and interpersonal communication. The null model did not show any significant variance among countries in the use of owned media by organisations. The variance in use of owned media was therefore not analysed further.

Table 1 shows the estimates (a kind of grand mean of the use of the media type) and the standard errors (comparable to a standard deviation) for the importance of mass media use, social media use, and interpersonal communication. It also shows the country-intercept variances in the null models. All country-intercept variances are significant. The Wald Z

statistic underlined that for all three media types. The significant country differences are the reason that a multilevel model is warranted.

After running the null models a second model (model 1 in table 1) was run for the media with significant country effects, adding predictors on the individual level (age, gender, education, years of experience and position in the organisation), and on the country level (media system). For the use of mass media this model only shows a significant effect of the media system in a country. A democratic corporatist media system has a negative influence on the importance that strategic communication professionals give to the use of mass media to address stakeholders, although the effect is marginally significant. The same effect can be observed in model 1 in table 1 on the importance of social media use. Additionally, in model 1 of social media use, individual effects of age and gender are also significant. Older age has a significant negative effect on the assessment of social media as important media. Female gender has a significant positive effect on that. For interpersonal communication the country effect is marginally significant and in model 1, a significant positive effect of female gender on the importance of face-to-face communication for addressing stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences is found.

Table 1

*Multilevel regression on the importance of mass media and social media use, and interpersonal communication by European communication professionals in 2016*  
*(N (individual level) = 2,170, N (country level) = 43)*

	Mass media				Social media				Interpersonal communication			
	Model 0		Model 1		Model 0		Model 1		Model 0		Model 1	
	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE
Intercept (Estimate)	.730	.006	.0732	.024	.739	.008	.781	.026	.739	.005	.728	.025
Individual level												
Age			ns				-.002****	.0005			ns	
Gender (female)			ns				.046****	.0082			.024***	.007
Education			ns				ns				ns	
<i>Ref. PhD</i>												
Experience			ns				ns				ns	
<i>Ref. more than 10 years</i>												
Position			ns				ns				ns	
Head of dept.												
Team leader												
<i>Ref. team member</i>												
Country level												
Media system											ns	
Democratic corporatist			-.0238*	.020			-.044**	.0146				
Liberal			ns				ns					
Polarized pluralist			ns				ns					
<i>Ref. Other</i>												
Country-intercept variance	.0006**	.0003	.0004*	.0002	.0014****	.0005	.0006*	.0003	.0004*	.0002	.0005*	.0002
-2 Res. Log. Likelihood	-1555.26		-1398.074		-1116.28		-1040.69		-1432.76		-1298.23	

Source: ECM 2016, \* p <.10, \*\* p <.05, \*\*\* p <.01, \*\*\*\* p <.001 (two-tailed test), ns = not significant

**Excellence in communication**

With the data of 2007 no excellence index could be constructed, because the excellence questions were not part of the survey. Therefore we only analysed the data from 2016 on effects in the perceived excellence of the communication function in organisations. The null model showed no significant country variance in the assessment of excellence of communication. The country-intercept variance is not significant meaning that there are no statistically significant differences in the perception of excellence of communication across Europe. This finding was underlined by Wald Z statistic that also did not show a significant result. Therefore the building of a next level model is not warranted in this case and was not conducted.

**Strategic issues for the communication field**

The effect of country and age on the perception of strategic issues for the field were assessed with two separate chi-square tests on the data from 2007 ( $N = 1087$ ) and 2016 ( $N = 2710$ ). Only the following four consistent issues (those that were asked in the same words in both years) were analysed: Dealing with the demand for new transparency and active audiences, coping with the digital evolution and the social web, linking business strategy and communication, and building and maintaining trust. In 2007 respondents came from 22 countries, in 2016 respondents came from 46 countries. The chi-square test was done with issue as the dependent variable and country as independent variables for both years separately. Age was grouped into a nominal variable in five groups: Under 29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59 and above 60. In 2007 there were no significant differences in the assessment of these four issues among countries and generations. The issues were considered equally important in all countries and in all age groups. Coping with the digital evolution and the social web was labelled important by 48.9% of the respondents, followed by linking business strategy and

communication by 45.6%, building and maintaining trust by 43.4%, and dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences by 36.3%.

In 2016 42% of the respondents think that linking business strategy and communication is an important issue with significant differences among countries ( $\chi^2 = 63.79$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and across age categories ( $\chi^2 = 10.80$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Country wise comparison of the mentioning of the issue shows that the top 5 of highest scoring countries on this issue are the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and Italy. In other countries this issue is less important. Middle-aged professionals think that this is important more than the youngest and oldest group, most respondents that think this an important issue are between 30 and 49 years old.

Coping with the digital evolution and the social web ranks second with 38.6% and also with significant differences across countries ( $\chi^2 = 80.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ), not across age categories.

Country wise comparison of mentioning the issue shows that the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany and Italy are the five highest scoring countries. Third is building and maintaining trust with 29.4%, with significant differences across countries as well ( $\chi^2 = 84.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Again country wise comparison shows the United Kingdom in the lead here, followed by Spain, Switzerland, Italy and Germany. Across age categories there are no differences, Dealing with the demand for new transparency and active audiences ranks fourth with 22.8% and significantly different across countries too ( $\chi^2 = 64.73$ ,  $p < .05$ ), not for age categories. The top 5 of the country wise comparison of mentioning the issue is United Kingdom, Netherlands, Germany, Spain and Sweden. Respondents in these countries think this issue important more than in other countries.

Country of residence therefore has a significant effect on the perception of all four strategic issues for the field. Age only has a significant effect on the perception of the importance of

linking business strategy and communication. For the other three issues there are no differences in perceptions between the generations. See table 3 for an overview.

Table 3

*Country and age differences in the importance of strategic issues for communication in Europe in 2016*

Strategic issue	Country	df	Age (in decades)	
	$\chi^2$ <sup>a</sup>		$\chi^2$	df
Coping with the digital evolution and the social web	80.59****	42	ns	
Linking business strategy and communication	63.79**	42	10.80**	4
Building and maintaining trust	84.38****	42	ns	
Dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences	64.73**	42	ns	

Note. Source: ECM 2016, *N* (individual level) = 2710, *N* (country level) = 43, \*\* *p* < .05, \*\*\*\* *p* < .001 (two-tailed test), ns = not significant. <sup>a</sup> More than 20% of the cells have an expected count of less than 5, figures are therefore an indication

## Conclusion and discussion

In this study we asked the following overall research question: Are country of residence and the age of European strategic communication professionals, predictors of their perception of the importance and the use of media for communication with stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences, their perception of strategic issues in the field, and their perception of excellence in strategic communication, and did these predictors change over time?

Concerning media use we can see that the four groups of media that were taken into account in this research (mass media, owned media, social media and interpersonal communication) are almost equally valued by strategic communication professionals in Europe today. The European communication monitor data already showed that (see e.g. Tench et al., 2017). In 2007 there were no differences between the ways professional valued media use in the different countries in Europe. Today we have found significant country effects for mass media, social media and interpersonal communication. These results seem to

suggest that national differences in those three categories of media use have increased since 2007. National habits and media culture seem to play a more important role in using media to address stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences now than in 2007. For mass media and social media the media systems of the country, as Hallin and Mancini described (2004), has a distinctive negative influence. The media system that communication professionals work with is therefore a likely partial explanation of the country effect. It is a question for further research to find out why that is and whether this differs for the different media systems. There are no age effects found for mass media and interpersonal communication, but the negative effect of age for social media suggests that older generations have more trouble to get accustomed to social media and work with them than younger generations. The analysis of media use suggests an ongoing diversification of media use according to country for mass media, social media interpersonal communication, and an age differentiation for social media. Country is a significant predictor for the use of media by strategic communication professionals and so is age. The answer to RQ1, does the assessment of the importance of media channels to address stakeholders, gatekeepers, and audiences differ across European countries and across generations, and does the media system affect the assessment of the relevance of media, is therefore yes. This national and generational differentiation has developed between 2007 and 2016.

More influence from national cultural contexts is also found in the analysis of the long term strategic issues for the field of strategic communication. In 2007 no significant differences were found among the European countries. In 2016 all four issues show significant varied patterns of importance across the European countries. For the most important issue for the field, linking business strategy and communication, an age effect was also found in 2016. That is new, in 2007 no differences between age groups were found. Again, with regard to these issues, the influence of country and age are growing. The answer

to RQ2, does the assessment of strategic issues for the field of communication differ across European countries and across different age groups, is also yes. The assessment of the most important issue, linking business to communication, has an age effect. The youngest (< 29 years old) and the oldest group (>50 years old) are less worried about this than their middle-aged colleagues. This could be explained by the different role professionals have in different age groups. The technical, instrumental role on the one hand and the managerial, strategic, role on the other hand are well documented in the literature (e.g. Gregory, 2010; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Van Ruler and Verčič, 2005). The younger generation might operate in a more technical role than middle aged professionals, who could be more in the lead and therefore in a managerial role. As a result of this younger professionals are probably less confronted with strategic question from the top management of the organisation than those of middle age. The oldest group could be more used to this managerial role than their middle aged colleagues and have a stronger position in the dominant coalition of managers in the organisation. Therefore they worry less about the issue of linking business and communication. They are probably working on it on a daily basis. How this works exactly is a question for further research.

Analysing country differences within an issue instead of issue differences within a country indeed paints a different picture. The United Kingdom ranks first in all issues and also Germany, Spain, Italy and Switzerland all show up in the top five more than once. Eastern and Northern European countries are almost absent in these lists, contrary to the comparison of issue importance within a country. It is not a simple North-South or East-West difference but strategic issues for the field seem to be more connected to the local business and political culture of a country now than in 2007 when no significant differences were found. This results opens up questions for further comparative research on this subject.

Excellence, on the other hand, is not linked to country or generation. No country effects were found for the assessment of the communication function as excellent. The



answer to RQ3, does the perception of excellence of the communication department and – function of the organisation differ across European countries and across different age groups, is no.

Overall it seems that the role of country of residence of the communication professional has increased between 2007 and 2016. Not for every aspect of the profession but especially for the use of mass media, social media and interpersonal communication, and for strategic issues. Strikingly these effects were not found for the use of owned media, nor for excellence in communication. It seems that aspects that are more directly connected to the organisation itself, like communication through owned media and the pursuit of excellence, are less influenced by country of residence than the other aspects. Country and age are not predictors for the use of owned media or the perception of excellence. This could mean that professionalization of the communication profession has various dimensions. This research seems to suggest that there is a dimension of addressing stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences through media channels that are not controlled by the organisation and the issues for the field are related to country and generation. It also suggests that there is a more general dimension of professionalization, independent of country and age, which is more about the organisation itself, the communication through owned media and the pursuit of excellence of the communication function. The first dimension is more related to two-way communication processes and the second more to one way communication and the internal organisational aspects of communication.

For the practice of strategic communication the results show that the local context of the organisation is perceived to be more important than in 2007 and should be addressed in the field. Regarding the most important strategic issue for the field, linking business strategy to communication (Tench et al., 2017), the age differences and country differences found suggest the need for reflecting on this issue with all age groups in the organisation. This

should be a top priority all over Europe. Since the local context is considered important, listening to the national stakeholders concerning the use of mass media, social media and interpersonal communication is important. Also considering the local business and political context for strategic issues seems important for practitioners. That being said it is important to notice that this is a very basic two-level multilevel regression model that has been built. Further analysis and modelling is necessary and can be done with the data from the ECM. The advantage of multilevel modelling is that it is a technique with a lot of possibilities. All kinds of additional variables from the profession or from the country or the factor time can be added to multilevel models. This first and provisional analysis with data from the monitor shows that it is possible to use these data for that and that it has an enormous potential for future research. These kind of analyses seem very promising to “work towards a consistent synthesis, i.e., a theoretical framework that contains nonrelativistic conjectures about the world from a nucleus for research to accumulate around” (Nothhaft, 2016, p. 69) and help the development of the field of strategic communication in the direction of an evidence based profession.

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